

# Chapter Two:

## Are You Having a Crisis, or Just a Bad Day? You Need a Plan!

What three elements constitute a real crisis?

Who takes the heat? How long will it last?

Mop-up is never easy—and real crisis planning starts with a plan.



## **CHAPTER TWO: Are You Having a Crisis, or Just a Bad Day? You Need a Plan**

It's very easy to be misled into thinking you have a crisis on your hands, and you well might. In PR, though, you have a crisis only when it's one of these three situations:

- A crisis at your business or organization that involves death or serious injury requiring hospitalization.
- Any violent or nonviolent action from individuals or groups that prevents the normal functioning of your business or organization.
- An event that attracts regional or national news media to your place of business or organization.

### **Who Takes the Heat?**

Ideally, there should be only one spokesperson for a crisis, with one backup. The goal here is to deliver accuracy, consistency, and organizational/personal presence, which means reflecting corporate/business/organizational principles and concerns in their most positive light.

Regardless of the size of your business or organization, follow the golden rule of *Fortune* 500 companies in their mission to always "Speak with one voice." This aim may appear simplistic, but it makes good sense; it helps ensure that all of the people involved throughout your organization are all on the same page. This way, there is minimal risk of being "off the record." Every employee needs to be told that only the designated spokesperson and backup can speak with the press and the public and that their cooperation is critical to their successful job performance.

The spokesperson should be on a high managerial level and handy with a camera. Be sure the place for picture taking is well lit with a nice clean background, so no potted plants are coming out of the speaker's head. Having the company's name on the lectern or a banner behind the person is a good idea as well.

### **They Don't Shoot the Messenger, Do They?**

Leave it to Winston Churchill to get the message right—to tell the truth. Think

of Churchill's famous 1940 radio speech that began, "The news from France is very bad." And his authentic voice was believed by all who were hearing it.

Like Churchill in war, the ideal designated spokesperson should:

- Come across as straightforward and honest.
- Be as good a listener as a speaker.
- Appear assertive and positive but not aggressive.
- Have an extensive and complete knowledge of the business or organization.
- Have the ability and authority to make decisions, meet deadlines, and honor promises.

It's not called streaming for nothing; news today is a constant flow—some would say deluge—of information 24/7 from many sources, and not a mere 30-minute segment on three big television stations twice a day. In the face of this, do not gild the lily. Tell it like it is, to the best of your ability. What are you going to do to make it right? And when? Then move on—or, as professional communicators like to say, put it behind you. Far behind you. But never forget the lesson it taught you.

And if the media get it seriously wrong, insist on correcting inaccuracies as soon as possible, especially when a media retraction is needed. Remember that what may seem trivial could easily spiral into a viral media "infection." You need to persist; as an example, an apparently minor correction to an obituary in *The New York Times* became important when the correction, once phoned in to the editors, was not made "because of the editor's failure to follow through." That acknowledgement was worthwhile to secure because it was the *Times's* error.

### **The Essentials**

- Be positive. Highlight safety records and acts of heroism on the part of rescuers and employees.
- Avoid speculating about what caused the crisis, and don't cover up or exaggerate the problem. Be careful not to give a statement you are not sure will stand up to scrutiny.
- Don't let a vacuum develop. Be super quick with the facts to avoid a less favorable opinion to dominate the news coverage.
- Never refuse to provide information. If you don't have the facts, get

them—or, explain upfront why you cannot disclose them yet. Take the names and numbers of any media person asking for information not yet available. Then be sure to get back to them with the facts or clarification.

- Be careful as well not to give any opinion—particularly your own—or more information than is required.
- Prepare recognized experts to speak on your company's behalf.
- Have relevant press materials on hand. Each press kit should be tailored to a specific situation.
- Communicate throughout the organization—all branches on every level. One incident in one location will trigger the media's interest wherever else you do business. And the trigger could be as insignificant as an Elvis Presley sighting in the employee cafeteria at Graceland.

### **Your Role as the PR Person**

As the PR person assigned to a crisis, you prepare the press release that announces a crisis or disaster and arrange for any press conference required. See Chapter Five in this book for the step-by-step on writing a press release.

You could be the spokesperson as well. If you are, set up an emergency press headquarters near the scene—in a hotel, for example—and arrange for telephones, laptops, food, and transportation.

In preparing the release, stick to the facts (yes, the standard what, when, where, who, why, and how; see Media Requirements below). Longer, more detailed materials about technology and personnel should be available for distribution in both print and electronic press kits as well.

Be sure all information is both accurate and doesn't compromise the company, organization, or person. To avoid being misquoted, follow up all oral interviews with a press release giving the facts. Don't be shy. Tell any media people why you are concerned and exactly how they might get it wrong.

Correct any wrong or misleading information immediately—or even faster—before it becomes part of the public record and a permanent record in cyberspace. Then, follow up to make sure the information has been either corrected or eliminated altogether.

## Media Requirements

Basically, the media will want to know:

- *What?* Assume they know nothing about your company or organization. Be prepared to answer these questions: What happened? What products were involved? What are the product's characteristics (consider: flammable, carcinogenic, hallucinogenic, and so on)? The nature of the accident; injury to staff, employees, general public; damage to property and equipment; repairs needed; length of time required to bring the crisis under control all need to be on the agenda.
- *When?* Day, date, and time of accident or incident.
- *Where?* The exact location, and the approximate distance from an urban area, local landmark, highway, or some other touchstone for frame of reference. The *where* can actually become *the* issue, such as the controversy surrounding the intended building of a mosque near Ground Zero.
- *Who?* You will be asked the name (s) and extent of injuries or fatalities with ages, addresses, job titles; what the injured were doing at the scene; where they were taken. This information is released only *after* families are notified; the media expects you to observe this rule. At the same time, given the state of the American family, you could be facing a *Dog Day Afternoon* event, in which what begins as a farcical caper evolves into tragedy as the agendas of the families and hostages merge. Families in crisis are difficult to predict.
- *Why?* Give the cause, if known; if not, *do not speculate*. Remember that there is no such thing as "off the record." Give the current situation only as it can be verified by established information. Give the status of the investigation and who is investigating—which government agencies are notified and/or on the scene.
- *How?* This question analyzes the facts, and often reveals missing data and faulty interpretations. Be sure, of course, to rely on the methods used to obtain the 5 Ws to help find any inaccuracies and inconsistencies.

## The Crisis Communications Plan

Financial institutions; utilities, including nuclear power companies—particularly in the wake of Three Mile Island; the extractive industries, including mining and gas explorations; and nonprofits that serve critical human needs are most alert to the risks that any business has to acknowledge—like it or not—when the organization, business, or person arouses negative publicity. So, if they're smart—and media aware—they'll be sure to have a crisis communications plan in place, one that has been reviewed and approved by management.

Everyone should know what everyone else is assigned to do in an emergency. If your concerns are manufacturing, for instance, inform local fire and police departments of your strategies for handling onsite problems. Utility companies in particular must keep public safety and enforcement agencies completely up to date on crisis planning. Anything to do with children must, of course, be responsible, thorough, and readily forthcoming with all plans for handling emergencies.

As you prepare for and write your crisis plan, keep in mind that your slice of the pie is communications; this is where you apply your experience and skills, including all your contacts and resources. Know your territory and where you can be most effective. Just as important, know your internal and external clients—their strengths, vulnerabilities, major issues. Assess the hierarchy of management and organizational levels, and be ready to take charge of communicating both internally and to the media—and remember that in the age of the Internet, cyberspace, and social media, nothing is local and anything is possible. Are 300 committed bloggers a more astute target for your message than thousands of direct-mail packets? It's your call.

To begin constructing a crisis communications plan, form a disaster response communications team across all levels of your business or organization (even if you are a Mom-and-Pop operation; in a crisis, there is no such thing as a small event); learn to think the unthinkable. Disasters of every magnitude come in all shapes and sizes and, in this era of environmental awareness and evidence of a warming planet, have effects both immediate and long brewing. Crises often surface years after the original, unremarked event, especially when harmful effects, such as cancer clusters, flooding, sinkholes, and so many dire problems surface many years after the first—and silent—happening. As the crisis professional, though,

your focus should be on what to do *now*: contain it, report it, manage it—all to minimize the damage and allow the rebuilding of public trust and consumer confidence. And it all should be plausible and ring true.

Preparedness is the first line of defense against what nature and civilization have in store for us. A well-researched crisis plan is the essential ingredient in being ready for anything and everything. It will help you and your clients minimize bad PR and make the most of the good in a crisis situation—which is just about all that can be hoped for, but it can keep things going and able to move on.

Like all the rest of life, of course, crisis planning is only as good as what you put into it. And once you do your due diligence, gather all the resources you can bring to bear in an emergency situation, and establish all necessary contacts and know how to communicate best with them, you write the plan. You may think that *Cliffnotes* and formulas are the answer, but nothing beats knowledge that is based on your real clients and their organizations and issues. Don't rely on second-hand when only first-hand will do. This means keeping information lines open, and being proactive in keeping current with what you need to know to do your job. After all, this is what you are hired for: promote in good times, and protect and support in bad.

When assembling your crisis plan, don't neglect learning about what *hasn't* worked. Savvy PR practitioners know that negative reactions can tell you more about yourself, your company, and your clients than you'll generally hear from your loyal—and unremarking—customers. Seek what you don't yet know, rather than burying yourself in the comfort of good but uninformed feelings; they are not reliable. Search out where the problems are and take steps to solve them in your own crisis plan.

Earlier in this chapter, we described the physical/emotional/intellectual characteristics of an effective PR/corporate spokesperson. Find that spokesperson, and the rest is up to you. (It could even be that *you* are that spokesperson.) Once disaster strikes—whatever the cause, from cyber space to the slippery company parking lot, the event is out of your direct control, but your response is in your hands. How you, your business, or organization reacts to what is suddenly news—and often an immediate disaster—says everything about who you are and what you are made of, even if you are a

conglomerate. Impressions, once made, are long lived in human memory and hard to shape and change.

If you can capture learned lessons following a crisis of any magnitude, you will be well on your way toward becoming a truly articulate and effective manager of communications. A challenge, to be sure, but one that could build your reputation as the person to hire to manage a crisis—and retain for years.

### *Resources*

The following sites, which provide plans written for schools and Red Cross units in crisis, are very helpful as models. They know as much about how to plan and proceed as anybody.

[www.ed.gov/emergencyplan](http://www.ed.gov/emergencyplan)

[www.fema.gov/kids/](http://www.fema.gov/kids/)

[www.ready.gov/](http://www.ready.gov/)

[www.redcross.org/services/disaster](http://www.redcross.org/services/disaster)

### **Setting Up Your Team**

No crisis communicator is an island. The crisis communication plan you develop should result from group effort, cooperation, execution, and meaningful follow-up.

Think about it. Each department in your group will have different concerns. For example, human resources might be sensitive to employment practices—especially diversity concerns. The company comptroller or organization treasurer might see the financial picture as a potential cause for bad press and poor image making. The IT people will have firewalls and breached security on their minds. And buildings and grounds are going to see those icy steps or salmonella in the cafeteria line as a certain trip to the court of appeals.

During some necessary and creative barnstorming, representatives from all company departments should be able to construct a “worst case” scenario to make everyone aware of the potentially damaging areas of concern, as well as the most proven way to handle the situation.

Here are the areas—arranged alphabetically, not in organizational hierarchy—to recruit for possible team members (and add more to tailor the



plan to the needs of your organization):

- Data processing/Office services
- Environmental concerns
- Facilities and distribution
- Human resources
- Investor/Stockholder relations
- Legal
- Management
- Marketing/Advertising/Telemarketing/Web/Social media
- Production/Manufacturing
- Public relations
- Safety/Security

### *The Lesson of Love Canal*

To encourage discussion during the initial, blue-sky crisis communication planning sessions, a helpful question to get things rolling is: What are the greatest fears for the most number of constituencies? In Love Canal, the residents of the Niagara Falls neighborhood were the most important public audience to consider, followed by company shareholders, the chemical industry, customers, and suppliers of Hooker Chemical, the financial community, government officials, and—finally—the public at large.

Love Canal, now an iconic case history in communications gone wrong, provides another valuable lesson—the length of time you need to be sensitive to the crisis. This incident, which involved heedless poisoning of the environment with harmful chemicals, came back to bite Hooker Chemical in the butt *more than 30 years* after the company vacated the polluted property.

### **Holding Their Feet to the Fire**

Having a crisis plan in place should give you support and fortitude, and position you well in your internal or external PR capacity. Get the higher-ups to sign off on it and then you have written commitment on what is expected of you and your company or organization.

It's true; they *do* shoot the messenger, so you require—and deserve—backup in establishing a crisis management plan. The problem is, though, it's hard to get any business person agree to spend the time and resources

needed to write a comprehensive and realistic plan. Nobody wants to face more anxiety than they are already coping with.

If you, your CEOs, or the nonprofit organization heads are not willing to commit the human and financial resources needed to develop and maintain a crisis communications plan, including updates, then you must make clear just why this situation is untenable. Without support from the top and with all of the stakeholders, any attempt to establish a crisis communications plan and a mandate to use such a plan if needed will remain in the planning stages forever. It's like an organizational black hole—a collection of great ideas that will never be acted upon because they require forethought and decision making to get a jump on possible negative events.

One PR organization surveyed American businesses a few years ago and found about half of the medium to large U.S. corporations had a crisis communications plan in place.

You have to wonder how many of these are boilerplate, fresh from the Internet. Not that boilerplate isn't a good place to start planning, but it can only be a start, and must be tailored to the needs and commitments of a particular organization.

### **The Essential Aware Leader**

Some groups and organizations are more likely to have a crisis communications plan ready than others. But many PR people report to a lone-gun-type director at the top, one who prides himself or herself on making all the important decisions alone. If you are the PR person in such an organization, it's a lot like being in on the Children's Crusade, as the communications professional who is soldiering on.

But for those few leaders who are not simply surrounding themselves with people who merely stroke their ego, they recognize that disasters happen. The wise ruler/leader never accepts a surprise to be business as usual. And yet, of course, not everything is within their control.

### **Final Word**

To sum it all up, you're only as good as your crisis plan and the buy-in of management and stakeholders. Do your homework, and make sure

everyone understands and is on board when disaster strikes—and it always does.